

# Change

Chas Brua, Laura Kemper and Dale Short  
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## Introduction and Introductions Laura Kemper

To be perfectly honest, I had the idea for this service in the shower one morning. It seemed to be an evocative topic with lots of directions in which to go, and an order of service seemed to naturally fall into place in my head. But it was kind of like the way your voice sounds gorgeous when you sing in the shower or you can speak another language fluently until you step out onto the cold bathroom tiles! Once on the metaphorical tiles, I began to think of just how many kinds of change there are:

At the most basic level,

there is the steady tumbling action of the sea which smoothed the sharp edges of this rock, and there is the tumultuous and unpredictable shift of the earth's plates in an earthquake.

There are the predictable changes that are related to growth and the stages of life, and there are the changes which are forced upon us by chance or luck—either bad or good.

There are the changes we have planned for, maybe even longed for,

There are the changes which we resist forever, and when we finally make them go smoothly and easily.

There are the changes which we resist forever and when we finally force ourselves into them, are still dreadfully hard

There are the changes which lead us into eye-opening new experiences which we are very grateful not to have missed.

Where to start?? Fortunately Dale Short and Chas Brua have graciously agreed to join me in presenting three different sharings on our topic. Dale is a senior at State High, an accomplished student, tinkerer and potter, and a fairly skeptical non-UU. His parents, Pam and Toby Short, attend services here more regularly

than he does, but I enjoy him a thoughtful, articulate, and funny friend who has UU leanings!

Chas is about to become a new member of our Fellowship and is already making contributions to the choir and the Sunday Services Committee. He will tell you more about his personal story later. I am grateful to them both for participating in the service.

We hope that our three sharings will stimulate thoughts about moments of change in your life and that some of you might share those experiences during the time for Congregational Sharing later in the service.

We will begin this morning with a view of what appears to be a predictable and intentional change: youth leaving home and going out into the world.

### **Sharing by Dale Short**

My parents have tried to put me down the right path for the last 17 years. I had all the usual forced vegetable consumption, mandated bedtimes and limited tv access. They cultured me by dragging me to Acoustic Brew concerts. They helped me appreciate the outdoors by making me go camping and signing me up for IM canoeing after school. (And let me tell you, you haven't had fun until you've fallen into 40 degree water on a 50 degree day.) So when I went to choose a college this fall, I naturally looked for a way I could undo all of what they call "my training". The answer was simple: become a New Yorker. An absolute Manhattan dwelling, New York Times reading, cab hailing, organic hand pressed coffee drinking beast. I aspire to become the kind of person who thinks painting a room high gloss black will really "open it up" or who hears a minimalist electronic drumbeat as a rich composition.

My big break was getting into The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. The Cooper Union is in the Lower East side of Manhattan,

1000 students, and only offers Art, Architecture, and Engineering. After touring 8 schools in 4 states, I fell in love with a school based on a two sentence blurb in Newsweek. Even though I would've gone to the Cooper Union sight unseen, it was a good idea for me to go see it first. Disclaimer: yes my favorite DJ's The Chemical Brothers just happened to be playing in New York City that weekend so I had to go to that too.

I have to say my first trip to New York doesn't make my chances of becoming a suave New Yorker look good. My first subway ride ever started with my backpack getting caught in the closing door, as I rushed to get on. When I emerged from the subway, it took me 10 minutes and traversing several blocks before I could figure out whether I was going east west or north south. Two hours into my visit, a pigeon scored a direct hit on my only t-shirt for the weekend. It's difficult to understand why I'm still looking forward to going though the abuse of the city on a daily basis. Moments before pigeons fateful bombing run, I was sitting in Confucius park watching old Chinese men play bizarre boardgames. Before that I was in the middle of the San Gennaro festival in little Italy. In a few hours I would be immersed in lasers, strobe lights and nuclear bass at a world class concert. I had something new to experience everywhere I went. Many times I was challenged and didn't know quite what to do but I took it in stride and learned for the next time. A weekend in New York City is only a taste of what my next four years could be like. Only time will tell if dealing with the unfamiliar will become annoying instead of exciting. I'm not sure if I ever will blend in with the cityscape and adeptly negotiate subway turnstiles and the grid of avenues and streets. I don't know if I'll have the time to explore the latest Guggenheim exhibit or the money to try a trendy restaurant. My cat, potters wheel and anything else that demands a large amount of space is going to be left behind. I'm voluntarily changing how and where I live because I'm ready to try it but there's no stopping the world so I can get off. One things for sure though: If the Staten Island ferry ever breaks down in mid January, I'll know what to do. I'll

get a paddle, find a canoe, and thank my parents for introducing me to 33 degree water.

### **Sharing by Laura Kemper**

In her book, The Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion describes the year in her life following the sudden death at the dinner table of her husband and fellow writer, John Gregory Dunne. She had sat down and then turned away from the table for a moment, and when she looked back, he had collapsed and was unresponsive. The book starts this way:

*Life changes fast.*

*Life changes in the instant.*

*You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*

*The question of self-pity.....*

For a long time I wrote nothing else.

*Life changes in the instant.*

*The ordinary instant.*

For some reason, those words captivate me. When someone tells me about an unexpected, life-altering event in their life, I respond with a mental click of my tongue and say, "Life changes in an instant" meaning Yep, you have to be vigilant. See, it just happened to someone I know on an ordinary day, it could happen to me.

I have realized recently that somewhere along the line, I came to be very wary of unforeseen catastrophic events. Even though I have never really experienced something sudden or random that drastically changed my life, I got in the habit of looking at upcoming ordinary events, and rather dramatically playing out in my mind both how those events could go disastrously wrong and what I would need to do in response. If my husband, Peter, were flying for business, I didn't just worry about the plane crashing. Without thinking about it, I would find myself deep into planning for who I would tell first that the plane had crashed, who would speak at his memorial service, where I could get a better paying job to support myself and the kids, etc. And what parent hasn't pictured the gory details of a terrible accident when their teenager is late getting home.

I guess I thought many people did this. But I have come to understand that I play out my fears a little farther than many.

When George Bush the first and Ronald Reagan were each elected president, I pictured massive social and economic upheavals around the world because they were Republicans. (Little did I know!)

And there was the time in the early 1980's, when a book called *The Clan of the Cave Bear* by Jean Auel was very popular. As I remember, it was the fictional account of a prehistoric woman and her daily struggle for survival—how she found food, made clothes, kept her family safe. I carefully saved that book, because I figured all the details about herbal medicine, making clothes from animal hides, and gathering food in the woods would come in handy if a nuclear holocaust ever happened! (We didn't talk about being knocked off the grid in those days!)

I also identify with characters in novels who worry as I do: When my father was dying at much too young an age of fast-moving cancer, I happened to be reading *The World According to Garp* by John Irving. The main character, Garp, has a gut-wrenching fear of the undertoad. Not the undertow, but the undertoad—a creature who can sneak up behind unsuspecting you, grab your feet and legs, and drag you underneath the surface of the water. I totally identified with this imagery, because it so poignantly captured what it felt like to be losing my father. But it sticks with me to this day as a symbol of my worry about random change.

Now, this tendency to catastrophize did not exactly cause me to shiver with fear and stay in my house nor did it keep me from trying to make changes I thought would enhance my life. And sometimes it came in handy—friends who went on trips with me marveled at how I always had any utensil, tool, or food that we eventually needed.

But after a while I began to realize that my thoughts might be curbing my instinct for adventure a bit, and I knew for sure that they were wasting a whole lot of my time! Also, I began to understand it as a kind of intellectual exercise: maybe I was practicing facing the change. Maybe it was a fear of losing control

that I was struggling with. The feared disaster hadn't even happened yet, and I was busy showing myself that I could cope with it.

So the question became: how to train myself to stop being a catastrophizer??

Of course, recognizing the tendency was an important first step. (Psych 101!) Then recently I was talking to a friend about how I picture world catastrophies and think about how I will get through them. She laughed and said, "Really? I never worry about things like that. Someone has always taken care of me, and I guess I figure someone always will." Whoosh, THAT blew my mind!

When I looked at my life a little more closely, I realized that even if I haven't faced events like my worst fears, I have had my share of times when despite all my best efforts, life seemed to be out of my control. I did lose my father unexpectedly, and my two daughters did not come into my life as easily as I had anticipated. One of my daughters carries burdens which seem unfairly heavy and intractable for one person to bear, and I can't carry these burdens for her.

But I have, indeed, coped with these events and probably even become a more authentic person in the process. Maybe I should give myself credit for having more strength and resilience than I thought. If something happens, I know I will try to cope—which is not the same as saying I won't suffer—but I don't really need to cope before it even happens!!

I am grateful to my Buddhist friends here at the Fellowship and elsewhere and to my friends who practice mindfulness for their perspectives. They have encouraged me to deal with only what is real—"Be in the moment,"--and to be more calm and accepting of even the hard realities of life—"It is what it is."

So when I start to catastrophize these days, I actively try to push those thoughts from my mind and even laugh at myself. And I have to say, it makes my attitude a lot less apocalyptic!

In the end, I think Joan Didion, who DID have to cope with a terrible loss and change, is getting where I would like to be getting too. After struggling for a year to accept the reality of her husband's death, she isn't really reconciled to it

but she is somewhat closer to accepting that there isn't very much she can do but go with what HAS happened. I am glad to be learning how to go with what IS happening in my life, rather than wasting precious time picturing the disturbing things which might happen.

I will close with this passage from Didion:

"I think about swimming with him into the cave at Portuguese Bend, about the swell of clear water, the way it changed, the swiftness and power it gained as it narrowed through the rocks at the base of the point. The tide had to be just right. We had to be in the water at the very moment the tide was right. We could only have done this a half dozen times at most during the two years we lived there but it is what I remember. Each time we did it I was afraid of missing the swell, hanging back, timing it wrong. John never was. You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that. No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that."

### **Story, told by Chas Brua**

*"Why the Owl Has Big Eyes," an Iroquois tale retold by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz in American Indian Myths and Legends (Pantheon). I've changed a word here or there, but otherwise, this is verbatim from Erdoes and Ortiz:*

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Raweno, the Everything-Maker, was busy creating various animals. He was working on Rabbit, and Rabbit was saying: "I want nice long legs and long ears like a deer, and sharp fangs and claws like a wildcat."

"I do them up the way they want to be; I give them what they ask for," said Raweno. He was working on Rabbit's hind legs, making them long, the way Rabbit had ordered.

Owl, still unformed, was sitting on a tree nearby and waiting his turn. He was saying: "Hoo-hooo, I want a nice long neck like Swan's, and beautiful red feathers like Cardinal's, and a nice long beak like Egret's, and a nice crown of plumes like Heron's. I want you to make me into the most beautiful, the fastest, the most wonderful of all the birds."

Raweno said: "Be quiet. Turn around and look in another direction. Even better, close your eyes. Don't you know that no one is allowed to watch me work?" Raweno was just then making Rabbit's ears very long, the way Rabbit wanted them.

Owl refused to do what Raweno said. "Hoo-hooo," he replied, "nobody can forbid me to watch. Nobody can order me to close my eyes. I like watching you, and watch I will."

Then Raweno became angry. He grabbed Owl, pulling him down from his branch, stuffing his head deep into his body, shaking him until his eyes grew big with fright, pulling at his ears until they were sticking up at both sides of his head.

"There," said Raweno, "that'll teach you. Now you won't be able to crane your neck to watch things you shouldn't watch. Now you have big ears to listen when someone tells you what not to do. Now you have big eyes--but not so big that you can watch me, because you'll be awake only at night, and I work by day. And your feathers won't be red like cardinal's, but gray like this"--and Raweno rubbed Owl all over with mud--"as punishment for your disobedience." So Owl flew off, pouting: "Hoo-hooo, whoo."

Then Raweno turned back to finish Rabbit, but Rabbit had been so terrified by Raweno's anger, even though it was not directed at him, that he ran off half done. As a consequence, only Rabbit's hind legs are long, and he has to hop around instead of walking and running. Also, because he got frightened that time, Rabbit has remained afraid of most everything, and he never got the claws and fangs he asked for in order to defend himself. Had he not run away then, Rabbit would have been an altogether different animal.

### **Sharing by Chas Brua**

I like the Iroquois story about the Owl and Rabbit because I can identify so much with both of those characters. Like the Owl, I often find myself trying to choreograph the future in such a rigid way that I end up stifling the very change that I hoped would happen. I have a problem with *certainty*—as in, I want to be certain of the outcome before I take the next step.

And like the Rabbit, I have a tendency to get scared, to run, to quit halfway—which also has the effect of blocking change. I can tell you a little story, and you can decide whether I'm more like the Owl, or the Rabbit, or maybe something else....

When I first got out of college, I moved to a city in western Pennsylvania and

worked as a copy editor at a newspaper. For the first couple of months, it was great—I was learning so much that I had never known before, and I liked my co-workers. But then our company was sold to a chain that had a somewhat dubious reputation. We embarked on a series of bosses—some were more or less decent people, some were arrogant and cruel. (One even had to resign because of criminal charges.) Things at work gradually got more and more toxic emotionally—more fear, more backstabbing as the company struggled—and my own personality became more toxic, too. I'm not proud of the person I was in those years—cynical, sarcastic, and very lonely. Telling it this way, it sounds like a quick process ... but I stayed in that workplace **for 10 years**. My wish for security and the known, even if it felt miserable, outweighed my desire for something different. If you want to meet someone who resists change when it's clearly needed, well, here I am.

The city where I worked—Johnstown—was very conservative, and I didn't feel comfortable telling anyone there my secret: that I was gay. To be honest, I wasn't too thrilled about that fact myself. (I came by this unease naturally: When my father found out about me, he said he would be afraid to go to the store because people would laugh at him.) Well, my social life was pretty much nil—in part because I worked nights and weekends and most of the rest of the world did not, but also just because I was really, really afraid.

Looking back, it now appears to me that as long as I stayed in that job, in that town, and in that kind of self-disgust, nothing much could get better in my life. But while I was in that space, I couldn't envision a way out.

Finally, after seven years, in desperation and hope, I moved to State College, which seemed like a more liberal community where something better might happen. But it took me three years to find a job here—which means that for three years, I drove to and from Johnstown five days a week, 90 miles each way. I figure if there's an afterlife, I'll probably end up in purgatory because of all the

carbon emissions I contributed to global warming during those years.

And then something unexpected happened—I applied for an editing job at Penn State (I told myself: “The University will never hire me, they’ve rejected me before, because I’m a loser”) ... and I got the job. Even better, they thought I was really good at it! The job was part-time at first, then full-time. I began to feel like I belonged, and the fact that Penn State had a nondiscrimination clause that included sexual orientation really helped me feel more accepted and accepting.

I enjoyed my job and my colleagues at the alumni magazine, but gradually I felt a desire to contribute more to the world, “to make a positive difference,” if that’s not too much of a cliché. I had been volunteering for several years at the Mid-State Literacy Council, tutoring people in English as a second language. I began to consider going to graduate school—but for about three years I would float the idea, then shoot it down, then float it again, then shoot it down again. Finally, a trusted mentor of mine said, somewhat exasperatedly: *If you don’t try, you’ll never know what might have happened. If you fail, so what?*

At the ripe old age of 36, I applied to Penn State’s M.A. program in teaching English as a second language. I was only going to apply as a part-time student, but one of my magazine colleagues encouraged me to try for a full-time berth with an assistantship. So I did—and got it. Turns out I loved school and enjoyed teaching. I stayed at my magazine job part-time while being a full-time grad student and teaching assistant, which means I didn’t have much student debt, but also not much free time. Still, in those years, I started making more friends in the gay community and even dated seriously for the first time in my life.

Which brings us up to today—I’m five and a half years into my doctorate in applied linguistics, I have more of a social and romantic life than ever before, and I feel happier than I can remember. I should say right now that part of my sense of connection comes from being here, in this fellowship, and especially in the

choir, which I've enjoyed more than I could have imagined.

But my old problem of resisting change is still with me. I find that the closer I get to finishing my doctorate, the slower I go. I wonder if I'm really cut out for the academic life. I wonder whether I'll be able to find a job that helps me develop as a person, or if I'll just get stuck like a hamster running on its wheel. I worry about having to move away from my biological family, who are quite elderly now, and from my closest friends, both old and new. I guess I'm having another failure of vision. Maybe some of you will think I'm a fool. Maybe some of you will be able to empathize.

As I was preparing this sharing, someone asked whether I could talk a little about ways to get past resistance to change. I wish I had better answers. All I know is that pushing too hard to change in a predefined way—seeking too much certainty—has often blocked me from changing. And not trying hard enough—clinging to what is familiar even when it's unsatisfying—has also created lots of barriers for me. If I had to point to one piece of wisdom, I guess it would be what my mentor said to me all those years ago: *If you don't try, you'll never know what might have happened. If you fail, so what?*

One of my dearest friends is a former classmate named Parastou. She's originally from Iran. When she lived in State College, I always looked forward to those times when she would invite me over to drink Turkish coffee. From her mother, she had learned to read the patterns made by the coffee grounds—a sort of fortune-telling. Neither of us really believed in it, but it was fun anyway. One time, in the patterns, she saw a turtle walking through my life. It was, she said, a very lucky symbol, a very good sign.

Well, Parastou has completed her own doctorate and moved away to California, where she now teaches at a university. As for me and the turtle, we're still here, moving ahead slowly, still wondering what my next change should be.